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## Is Alexander Downer just a failed Aussie politician, or can he help achieve peace in Cyprus?

*By Lee Duffield*

*European Voice*, Brussels, 04.09.2008 / 00:00 CET

*The patrician Australian Alexander Downer, a former foreign minister, will take to his high-level task as UN special envoy for Cyprus as if to the manner born – although he has had some stumbles along a privileged career path.*

He is above all a politician, born into a political family. His grandfather, John Downer, was prime minister of South Australia, and his father became Australia's high commissioner – or ambassador – in the UK. Downer has 24 years' service in Australia's national parliament, the last 12 as the country's longest-serving foreign minister. Canberra political circles are confident that his knowledge of insider politics and international negotiation qualify him well for the Cyprus appointment.

Downer did not cover himself with glory in East Timor...taking a very hard line in the negotiations over oil royalties in the Timor Sea. At the age of 13, he accompanied his father to England and stayed to obtain a degree in economics. He worked in banking and later in the diplomatic service, including a spell in Brussels, where he learnt conversational French. He returned home to life as part of the old-money establishment in the dignified city of Adelaide, where his father's seat in the House of Representatives beckoned. But his distinctively non-Australian accent and elegance landed him in early trouble: public ridicule of perceived foppiness obliged him to step down as leader of the right-of-centre Liberal party and leader of the opposition after only eight months.

His fortunes changed for the better when John Howard, Downer's successor as party leader, was elected prime minister in 1996. Howard had a sense of indebtedness to the man who had peacefully handed over the leadership to him, says Peter Hartcher, the political editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

According to John Wanna, a politics professor at the Australian National University in Canberra, Downer was probably Howard's closest political confidant and few decisions were taken on foreign or domestic affairs without his input.

That depth of experience was a key recommendation. Ban Ki-moon, the

United Nations secretary-general, knew there was much at stake when he announced the Cyprus appointment on 12 July. He told the inaugural Union of the Mediterranean conference, “significant and courageous overtures” by both parties to the division of Cyprus had generated “great expectations”.

Mehmet Ali Talat's election as Turkish Cypriot president in 2005 had signalled a break with the separatist demands of his predecessor, Rauf Denktash. Talat started a drive to end the isolation of the Turkish community. When Cyprus then elected the left-wing Demetris Christofias as its president on a platform of making peace, the best chance of a settlement for many years opened. A top-quality professional facilitator was called for. Downer rapidly made a preliminary visit to Cyprus, as Christofias and Talat were preparing for the start of full-scale negotiations in September.

Downer's appointment as a UN envoy was counter-intuitive in one conspicuous respect. During his term of office, Australian foreign policy had shared the Bush administration's hostility towards multilateralism in general and the UN in particular. Downer has been among the most forthright supporters of Australian military action in lock-step with Washington, in both Afghanistan and Iraq. “If we start giving in to terrorists and withdrawing our troops...then our international relationships will be determined by terrorists,” he would say. On a visit to Washington in late 2006, he reassured Condoleezza Rice, the US secretary of state, over America's difficulties in Iraq. “I don't think the Americans will find that Australians are weak, fair-weather friends,” he told her.

But the apparent contradiction is discounted by informed observers. Although he was in a government that was sceptical, if not contemptuous, of the UN, “he was himself more supportive of it”, according to a senior commentator from the Canberra media gallery. Earlier episodes in Downer's career might give Ban other cause to reflect on his choice. Howard's indulgence allowed Downer to emerge unscathed from a series of weak performances. “He became a protected species even though he cocked up repeatedly,” says Hartcher. He cites a scandal over the Australian Wheat Board delivering money to Saddam Hussein for back-door access to Iraqi markets, Australia's strident commitment to the US cause in Iraq and hard-line responses to illegal immigration.

Downer was repeatedly confronted by Kevin Rudd, then Labor foreign affairs spokesman and now prime minister. “His mediocrity allowed Rudd to shine,” says Hartcher. And according to Wanna, “Rudd could not stand him”, and “Downer felt very uncomfortable”.

The Labor administration is now characterising many of its own initiatives as compensation for the misdeeds of the former foreign minister. “The Rudd government is re-engaging with the international community...in recognising and facilitating the international human rights system,” said Attorney General Doug McClelland on 8 August, announcing Australia's ratification of the UN Convention Against Torture. At the same time, Australia ended the controversial practice of across-the-board detention of asylum-seekers arriving without visas.

Judgments of Downer are friendlier on the 1999 settlement for East Timor, where he claims a leading role and which represents one of his credentials for aiding agreement in Cyprus. But even there, Wanda has some criticisms. “Downer did not cover himself with glory in East Timor,” he says, by subsequently “taking a very hard line in the negotiations over oil royalties in the Timor Sea.” This was “not very conciliatory towards a developing country with few resources”.

What are Downer's prospects in Cyprus, then, against this track record? In their end-of-career pieces on Downer, the Australian media generally sided with the view that retiring ministers could be useful if kept at the political grindstone. Downer himself, in a final message to his electors, described three kinds of politician: communitarians content to do local service; ruthless opportunists looking for cabinet rank and celebrity status; and conviction politicians with a clear vision for the future. “In truth, all politicians have a bit of each of these characteristics,” he said.

#### Fact file

##### Curriculum vitae

1951: Born, Adelaide

1964: Moved to UK, educated at Radley College and Newcastle University

1975: Economist, Bank of New South Wales

1977: Diplomatic officer, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs

1983-84: Director, Australian Chamber of Commerce; adviser to the leader of the federal opposition

1984: Elected to House of Representatives

1994: Leader of the Liberal Party and leader of the opposition

1996-2007: Foreign minister

2008: Resigned from parliament; UN special envoy to Cyprus trilateralism in general and the

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